

WASL to pull question Latinos find offensive

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*On the Web: Read
"Breaking Through," by
Francisco Jiménez, at
spokesmanreview.com*

Washington Latinos are demanding an explanation from the state after a student protested a question on the Washington Assessment of Student Learning that he found culturally offensive.

The question is actually an excerpt from the memoirs of a Latino college professor about growing up in poverty as the son of a migrant farm worker in the United States during the 1950s and '60s.

But in the abridged context of a test question, the passage appears to stereotype Latinos as farm workers willing to work for dirt wages and who deserve to be deported.

Terry Bergeson, superintendent of public instruction, said the passage will no longer be used in future versions of the test.

"After review, I recognize that the passage should not have been part of the test without the historic context in which it takes place," Bergeson said.

But Latino leaders want to know how the passage could have been considered appropriate in the first place.

"We demand from OSPI an accounting of how the process worked," said Yvonne Lopez Morton, of Spokane, chairwoman of the governor's Commission on Hispanic Affairs. "Where was the oversight, where was the accountability and how did it fall through the cracks?"

A spokesman for the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction said all test questions are reviewed by a panel of citizens for bias and fairness.

"No system is perfect," said spokesman Thomas Shapley, "but at least it had been reviewed."

Shapley also said that scoring on the writing portion of the test will be monitored and if there is a disproportional effect on Latino students, "there is the possibility that the question would not be scored on this year's exam."

The controversial question was brought to light by Juanita Doyon, of the anti-WASL group Parent Empowerment Network, who released an e-mail she received from an anonymous 10th-grade Latino student who found the excerpt offensive.

Doyon, a former candidate for superintendent of public instruction, asked how OSPI will be able to tell whether the controversial question affected students' scores when more than half of Latino students fail the test, anyway.

"As far as I'm concerned, the entire test should be invalid," Doyon said, citing cultural bias in the exam.

The passage in question is from "Breaking Through," by Francisco Jiménez, a professor of modern languages at Santa Clara University.

Jiménez, speaking from his home in California, said the controversy is perhaps the result of the student misinterpreting his work, which is autobiographical.

"My hope in writing this book was to chronicle my family's experience and that of many families who worked very hard in the fields in poor living conditions," Jiménez said.

Families like his, he said, were sustained by the hope of making a better life for their children.

"If that doesn't define the American dream, I don't know what does," Jiménez said.

Published in 2001, "Breaking Through" won the Pura Belpré Award, presented to a Latino writer or illustrator "whose work best portrays, affirms and celebrates the Latino cultural experience in an outstanding work of literature for youth and children."

Jiménez said it is probable the test's authors, Pearson Educational Measurement, obtained permission to use the excerpt from his agent.

To Lopez-Morton and other Latino leaders, the passage, taken out of the context of a former migrant worker's memoirs without the benefit of class discussion, marginalizes Latinos.

"We have struggled so long about WASL and whether it's going to be competent and respectful, and something like this happens," Lopez-Morton said. "It's shocking."

The state Legislature is debating measures to revise graduation requirements for students who fail the 10th-grade WASL.

Maria Rodriguez-Salazar, of Vancouver, Wash., a national vice president of the League of United Latin American Citizens, said the incident demonstrates that the OSPI is disconnected from the Latino community.

"This is what our children face every day," Rodriguez-Salazar said of the state's educational system, in which half of Latino students do not graduate from high school.